

Albert G. Bustamante

1935–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 1985–1993
DEMOCRAT FROM TEXAS

Born to migrant workers and unable to speak English until he was nine years old, Albert Bustamante was eventually elected to Congress from the poor Hispanic suburbs in South Texas where he grew up. A self-described political “moderate who hugs the middle and can go either way,” and an active member of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC), Bustamante was the swing vote on important Latin American issues such as aid to Nicaraguan rebels and immigration control during his four terms in Congress.¹

The oldest of 11 children in a family of migrant workers, Albert Garza Bustamante was born April 8, 1935, in Asherton, Texas. As a child, he picked crops with his family in Oregon from May to September. “I know the vicious cycle of migrant life,” he later recalled. “What we earned in the five months before returning to Texas in September had to support us the rest of the year.”² Bustamante began school at age nine, speaking an “in-between Spanish dialect” and unable to read or speak English.³ Hampered by this late start, Bustamante struggled academically, but managed to graduate from Asherton High School in 1954. He joined the U.S. Army that same year, serving as a paratrooper until 1956. Bustamante attended San Antonio College from 1956 to 1958 before transferring to Sul Ross State College in Alpine, Texas. Financing his final semester of education with a \$250 loan from a school janitor, he graduated with a degree in secondary education in 1961. Bustamante taught at Cooper Junior High School in San Antonio and coached football and basketball for seven years. He married Rebecca Pounders, and the couple raised three children: Albert, John, and Celina.

In 1968 Bustamante got his start in politics as a constituent aide in the San Antonio-based district office of U.S. Representative Henry González. He worked there for three years. But in 1971, believing the liberal

Democratic incumbent on the county commission “had polarized the community, pitting Anglo against Mexican-American,” Bustamante won his first elective office to a five-year term in the Bexar County Commission.⁴ In 1978 Bustamante became the first Hispanic American elected to a major Bexar County office when he won a judgeship. He was soon recognized as one of the leading conservative Democrats in the county, which included San Antonio and its suburbs.⁵

In 1984 Bustamante took on Abraham Kazen, an 18-year incumbent, for a House seat representing the northwest San Antonio suburbs in Bexar County. The diverse district included many middle-class, primarily white communities outside the city as well as the rural, mostly Hispanic towns near Laredo, on the Mexican border. Though its voters leaned Democratic, socially conservative Hispanics as well as a large military presence from several nearby air force bases generally made the district more competitive.⁶ Bustamante’s greatest obstacle proved to be the Democratic primary race against the entrenched incumbent. Bustamante criticized what he said were Kazen’s scarce accomplishments during his long career, playing up his ethnicity and the possible increase of Hispanics in Congress. This strategy was particularly effective since the primary fell on Cinco de Mayo (May 5), the widely celebrated date of Mexico’s victory over French invaders in 1862. “Help me on Cinco De Mayo to declare our independence from an old political family who has controlled the destiny of this area,” he told a crowd of Hispanic voters.⁷ Bustamante upset Kazen in the Democratic primary, winning every county in the district and taking 59 percent of the vote to his opponent’s 37 percent. He was unopposed in the general election.

When Bustamante arrived in Washington in 1985, he was elected president of his Democratic freshman class.



He was the first Hispanic to be so honored.⁸ During his first term he also received a position on the Democratic Steering and Policy Committee, which assigned committees and set party policy. Bustamante was assigned to the Government Operations and Armed Services Committees, on which he served his entire congressional career. The latter proved beneficial for serving the large military population in his district. In his final two terms Bustamante also served on the Select Committee on Hunger.

Bustamante's position as a moderate Democrat often defined his congressional career, and he sought to balance the needs of his Anglo and Hispanic constituents. He was an active member of the CHC, eventually serving as chairman in the 100th Congress (1987–1989). Bustamante firmly believed in the caucus's power to improve the lives of Hispanic Americans, especially those in the impoverished border communities. He brought attention to the *colonias*, or rural Hispanic neighborhoods, along the U.S.-Mexico border, arguing in favor of more funding for food for the poor and increased economic opportunities. "We ... want to upgrade the economic status of our group because as you enhance that economic status you bring about jobs to that community," Bustamante said. "And hopefully they can identify with our roots and invest within the community."⁹ Yet he took an unpopular stance within the Hispanic community by opposing bilingual education in border schools. "I'm for bringing about a system of education that will help a child to live in the business climate we have in this area of the country," he argued. "And that is [in] English."¹⁰

Bustamante's middle-of-the-road approach to combating communism in Central America ultimately placed him in the middle of difficult votes during legislative showdowns between President Ronald W. Reagan and the Democratic majority in the 99th Congress (1985–1987) over the provision of humanitarian and military aid to Contra rebels attempting to overthrow Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista regime.¹¹ Caught between the negative effect of Central American unrest on trade and immigration along the Texas border and his uneasiness with an increased U.S. military presence in the region, Bustamante wavered between

supporting legislation to provide the Contras solely with humanitarian assistance and supporting legislation to provide them both financial and military aid.¹² On April 23, 1985, he joined the Democratic majority, who rejected the Reagan administration's proposed \$14 million package, fearing that funding for humanitarian aid would be redirected for military purposes.¹³ The following June, however, Bustamante, along with a handful of moderate Democrats, bucked Party leaders to support a \$27 million White House-backed aid package including both humanitarian and nonlethal military support.¹⁴ Bustamante cited the desperate need for humanitarian assistance in the war-torn region—even when tied to military support—as his primary motive for switching his vote.¹⁵

When the issue of aid for the Nicaraguan Contras came up again in early 1986, however, Bustamante was undecided about a Reagan-backed proposal for \$100 million, 30 percent of which would be humanitarian aid, with the remainder earmarked for military assistance. He was among the 31 moderate Democrats who wrote to the President asking him to delay seeking military assistance and focus instead on peace talks. Both the White House and liberal Democrats pressured the signatories. Of Reagan's televised address to the nation on March 16, Bustamante noted, "If you were on the right, you applauded. If you were on the left, you tried to shoot holes in it. Those of us in the middle are looking at both sides and saying 'My God, what is going on?'"¹⁶ Bustamante was among more than a dozen Democrats who were summoned to the White House and courted by the President's top aides.¹⁷ In the face of sharp partisan bickering Bustamante helped narrowly defeat the bill, 222 to 210, on March 20, 1986.¹⁸ But when the \$100 million package came up again in June, Bustamante was among six Democrats and five Republicans who changed their positions, providing a substantial victory for the Reagan administration when the legislation passed, 221 to 209.¹⁹ Bustamante credited his change of mind to observations he made on a trip to Central America. "There will be no peace in Central America until internal reform is forced [on the Nicaraguan government]," he admitted,

after meeting with Contra leaders and Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega. “I came away convinced that we need to continue to pressure the Sandinistas.”²⁰

The public revelation of the Iran-Contra scandal in November 1986 changed Bustamante’s mind once again. When reports surfaced that arms and funding sent to Iran to aid in its ongoing war with Iraq had been diverted to the Nicaraguan Contras without Congress’s knowledge, the administration came under withering scrutiny from Capitol Hill and the Justice Department. Citing these revelations, Bustamante expressed distrust about the allocation of any future aid, demanding to “know where the money is going.” “We’ve got too many free agents setting policy in Central America,” he observed.²¹ Bustamante also became the target of attack ads during the 1986 election cycle that painted moderates who voted against Reagan’s original Contra aid package as unpatriotic. These “underhanded tactics” further convinced Bustamante to vote on March 11, 1987, to withhold the \$40 million remaining in the original \$100 million aid package.²² Thereafter, Bustamante regularly opposed military aid for the Nicaraguan Contras.²³

Bustamante sided with the Reagan administration on the issue of immigration. He and four other Hispanic Members—Esteban Torres and Tony Coelho of California, Solomon Ortiz of Texas, and Bill Richardson of New Mexico—out of the 11 voting members of the CHC approved the administration’s Immigration Reform and Control Act on October 9, 1986.²⁴ Proposed in response to rising illegal immigration, the legislation fined employers for knowingly hiring undocumented workers, but offered legal status to those who had entered the United States before 1982 and had lived there continuously. The legislation was aimed at Hispanic immigration, which had increased dramatically after an economic recession in Mexico in the early 1980s. Bustamante favored regulating immigration to benefit the economy of the border towns in his district, which were flooded with workers.²⁵ He also feared that Hispanic-American workers would be discriminated against because of the fines levied on the employers of undocumented workers. “The demonstrated tendency of businesses to

play it safe while hiring could jeopardize the employment of as many as 150,000 Hispanic job seekers every week,” Bustamante told his colleagues. “The consequence ... is the violation of a fundamental right of all Americans, including Hispanic Americans—the right to work.”²⁶ Bustamante protested the higher-than-expected fee proposed by the Reagan administration for those applying for legal status; the fee was \$150 to \$200 versus the original figure of \$100. In 1990 Bustamante called for the repeal of all employer sanctions when the General Accounting Office reported that those seeking employment who had a “foreign appearance or accent” were often discriminated against under the 1986 law.²⁷

Bustamante warily supported increased military spending. Though he favored projects that positively affected the military bases in his district, he often voiced concern about their impact on the environment and about the safety of nuclear production plants.²⁸ Because Bustamante served on two subcommittees that oversaw the manufacture of nuclear power and weapons—Procurement and Military Nuclear Systems (Armed Services Committee) and Environment, Energy, and Natural Resources (Government Operations)—he had a platform from which to critique the management and proliferation of such facilities. In 1988 he noted the ailing Savannah River weapons plant in South Carolina “has been living on the edge of a major disaster for 30 years” when fires, equipment failure, and plutonium leaks inspired an investigation by the Department of Energy.²⁹ Bustamante eventually supported closing the Savannah plant and other plants, castigating the oversight committees for their lack of action regarding faulty facilities. “The Armed Services Committee has done very little,” he scolded. “Anytime we get into a problem ... nobody on the committee knows what is what. We just delegate things to the Department of Energy,” which he noted was already stretched thin having to regulate 17 plants across a dozen states.³⁰ In 1987 and 1988, Bustamante supported the Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty amendments put forth by liberal Democrats.

In 1992 Bustamante faced Republican Henry Bonilla, a local television producer, in an attempt to win a fifth term.

Though he raised significantly more money than Bonilla did in the first half of the year, Bustamante's electoral chances were later dimmed by scandal.³¹ In December 1990, he admitted that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) had been questioning his friends and family as part of a three-year probe into his receipt of monetary bribes in exchange for federal contracts. Bustamante denied the charges, but Bonilla highlighted the ongoing investigation throughout the campaign.³² He also underscored Bustamante's 30 overdrafts from the House "Bank," an informal institution run by the Sergeant at Arms in which some Members deposited their congressional pay. Though Bustamante's overdrafts were modest compared to those of the worst offenders in the House "Bank" scandal, he was one of a handful of Members with overdrafts who did not receive a letter from the U.S. Attorney special counsel clearing him of criminal wrongdoing before the election.³³ Redistricting further hampered Bustamante's re-election bid; Hispanic neighborhoods in the southwest sections of San Antonio were sliced out of his district, increasing the leverage of heavily Republican and Anglo neighborhoods northwest of the city.³⁴ Additionally, Bonilla's media work, linked with a popular television news program, gave him greater name and face recognition than Bustamante. Campaigning on reducing government regulations and taxes, Bonilla defeated Bustamante by a margin of 59 to 39 percent. In a year of incumbent losses nationwide, Bustamante was the only Latino incumbent who was not re-elected. He blamed his loss on the negative press generated by the scandals. "I could not sustain the tremendous amount of publicity that went against me," he said.³⁵

Shortly after Bustamante left Congress, the FBI investigation resulted in an indictment on 10 counts of accepting bribes amounting to more than \$300,000 in exchange for his official activities. On July 21, 1993, Bustamante was convicted on two of these 10 charges. A federal judge in San Antonio sentenced him to three and a half years in prison and ordered him to pay \$55,100 in fines and legal fees.³⁶ After a series of unsuccessful appeals, Bustamante began serving out his prison term in El Paso, Texas, in May 1995. Upon his release from prison in 1998,

Bustamante returned to San Antonio, where he manages a shopping center and works on projects related to affordable housing and education.³⁷

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, "Albert G. Bustamante," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

Broder, David S. *Changing of the Guard: Power and Leadership in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980).

Rodriguez, David. *Latino National Political Coalitions: Struggles and Challenges* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000).

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

The University of Texas at San Antonio Library, UTSA Archives (San Antonio). *Papers*: 1980–1992, 13 boxes, 5 linear feet. The collection documents Albert Bustamante's career from 1980 to 1992 as a Bexar County judge and as a U.S. Congressman. The bulk of the collection consists of incoming and outgoing correspondence from constituents and colleagues. The remainder of the records compile Congressman Bustamante's legislative record through vote books, a legislative profile, and his weekly newspaper column. The collection is divided into two series: papers from his tenure as a Bexar County judge and papers from his tenure as a U.S. Congressman.

NOTES

- 1 David S. Broder, *Changing of the Guard: Power and Leadership in America* (New York: Penguin Books: 1980): 286.
- 2 Spencer Rich, "The Cutting Edge: Migrant Workers Suffer Nutritional Deficiencies," 11 April 1989, *Washington Post*: 5.
- 3 Broder, *Changing of the Guard*: 286.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 See, for example, Broder, "Texas, Vital to a Carter Victory, Presents Many Obstacles," 14 September 1980, *Washington Post*: A2; Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Keeping Glenn Moderate," 13 July 1983, *Washington Post*, A19.
- 6 *Almanac of American Politics, 1986* (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Inc., 1985): 1339.
- 7 *Politics in America, 1990* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1989): 1493.
- 8 "Minority Reports," 16 December 1984, *New York Times*: E20.
- 9 Antoinette Sedillo Lopez, ed., *Latino Communities: Emerging Voices* (New York: Routledge, 2002): 102.
- 10 Broder, *Changing of the Guard*: 286.

- 11 For more information on the Hispanic Caucus's perspective on Central American policy, see Antonio González, "Chicano Politics and U.S. Policy in Central America, 1979–1990," in David Montejano, ed., *Chicano Politics and Society in the Late Twentieth Century* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999): 154–172.
- 12 *Politics in America, 1990*: 1493.
- 13 *Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 1985* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1986): 22-H–25-H; *Congressional Record*, House, 99th Cong., 1st sess. (23 April 1985): 9085–9086; *Congressional Record*, House, 99th Cong., 1st sess. (24 April 1985): 9255–9257; Jacquelyn Swearingen, [No title], 23 April 1985, State News Service.
- 14 Bustamante voted with President Reagan in all five crucial votes on the bill that took place June 12. *Congressional Record*, House, 99th Cong., 1st sess. (12 June 1985): 15419–15420, 15431, 15436–15437, 15466, 15468–15469; *Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 1985*: 46-H–49-H.
- 15 Jacquelyn Swearingen, [No title], 12 June 1985, State News Service.
- 16 Jacquelyn Swearingen, [No title], 19 March 1986, State News Service.
- 17 Robert Parry, "Centrist Democrats Seek Delay on Contra Aid," 3 February 1986, Associated Press; Edward Walsh and Milton Coleman, "Reagan Twists Arms as Aides Seek Pact on Aid to Contras," 19 March 1986, *Washington Post*: A27; Lea Donsky, "Contra Deal Rides on a Few Votes," 18 March 1986, *Chicago Tribune*; Swearingen, [No title], 5 June 1986, State News Service.
- 18 *Congressional Record*, House, 99th Cong., 2nd sess. (20 March 1986): 5770–5771; *Congress and the Nation, 1985–1988* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1990): 178.
- 19 *Congressional Record*, House, 99th Cong., 2nd sess. (25 June 1986): 15562–15563; Linda Greenhouse, "Lobbying Succeeds," 26 June 1986, *New York Times*: A1.
- 20 Edward Walsh, "House Reverses Vote, Approves Reagan Plan for Aid to the Contras," 26 June 1986, *Washington Post*: A1.
- 21 Karen Tumulty, "House Votes to Bar Funds for Contras," 12 March 1987, *Los Angeles Times*: 1.
- 22 R. W. Apple, Jr., "North Role Cited in Bid to Unseat Contra Aid Foes," 15 December 1986, *New York Times*: A1; *Congress and the Nation, 1985–1988*: 211; *Congressional Record*, House, 100th Cong., 1st sess. (11 March 1987): 5467.
- 23 See, for example, the final vote on H. J. Res. 484, *Congressional Record*, 100th Cong., 2nd sess. (3 March 1988): 3257, and the amendment proposed by Henry Hyde of Illinois to H.R. 4387. See *Congressional Record*, 100th Congress, 2nd sess. (26 May 1988): 12526.
- 24 *Congressional Record*, House, 99th Cong., 2nd sess. (9 October 1986): 30075–30076.
- 25 See, for example, *Congressional Record*, House, 99th Cong., 2nd sess. (9 October 1986): 26403, 31644; Robert Pear, "Immigration Bill: How 'Corpse' Came Back to Life," 13 October 1986, *New York Times*: A16.
- 26 *Congressional Record*, House, 99th Cong., 2nd sess. (9 October 1986): 30051.
- 27 Robert Pear, "Study Finds Bias, Forcing Review of 1986 Alien Law," 30 March 1990, *New York Times*: A1.
- 28 Richard Haller, "Budget Cuts? 'Not in My District!'," 11 February 1988, *New York Times*: A20.
- 29 Keith Schneider, "Inquiry Ordered at Nuclear Arms Site," 7 October 1988, *New York Times*: A18.
- 30 Fox Butterfield, "Trouble at Atomic Bomb Plants: How Lawmakers Missed the Signs," 28 November 1988, *New York Times*: A1.
- 31 Jonathan Moore, "Bustamante Warchest Larger Than Bonilla's," 3 June 1992, State News Service.
- 32 See, for example, Jennifer Dixon, "Bustamante Says FBI Questioning People about His Links to Bingo," 6 December 1990, Associated Press; Hugh Aynesworth, "Bustamante Calls Probe GOP Political Vendetta," 1 October 1992, *Washington Times*: A5.
- 33 See, for example, Karen J. Cohen, "Rep. Bustamante Has No Problems with Releasing Names in the Check-Cashing Scandal," 11 March 1992, State News Service; William E. Clayton, Jr., and Damon Gardenhire, "House Unmasks Check-Kiters; Names of 21 Texas Members Listed in 'Rubbergate' Report," 17 April 1992, *Houston Chronicle*: A1; Dante Chinni, "3 Texans Unable to Shake House Banking Scandal," 10 October 1992, *Houston Chronicle*: A4; Dante Chinni, "3 in Check Case Hope the All-Clear Really in the Mail," 31 October 1992, *Houston Chronicle*: A16.
- 34 Hugh Aynesworth, "Bustamante Calls Probe GOP Political Vendetta," 1 October 1992, *Washington Times*: A5; *Almanac of American Politics, 1994* (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Inc., 1993): 1263.
- 35 James Rubin, "Scandal the Deciding Factor for Many of Congress' Losing Incumbents," 4 November 1992, The Associated Press.
- 36 Bustamante's wife, Rebecca, was also charged with seven counts of bribery. She was acquitted on all charges. See, for example, "Ex-Congressman Indicted on Charges of Accepting Bribes," 19 February 1993, *New York Times*: A11; Federal Jury Convicts Ex-Texas Congressman, 22 July 1993, *New York Times*: A21; "Ex-Congressman Is Sentenced," 2 October 1993, *New York Times*: 9.
- 37 University of Texas at San Antonio, Archives and Special Collections, "A Guide to the Albert Bustamante Papers, 1980–1992," <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/utsa/00006/utsa-00006.html> (accessed 14 July 2009).